

the the future of youth ministry courage to wonder

by tiger mcluen

In the second
installment of
a yearlong series,
veteran youth min-
ister and educator

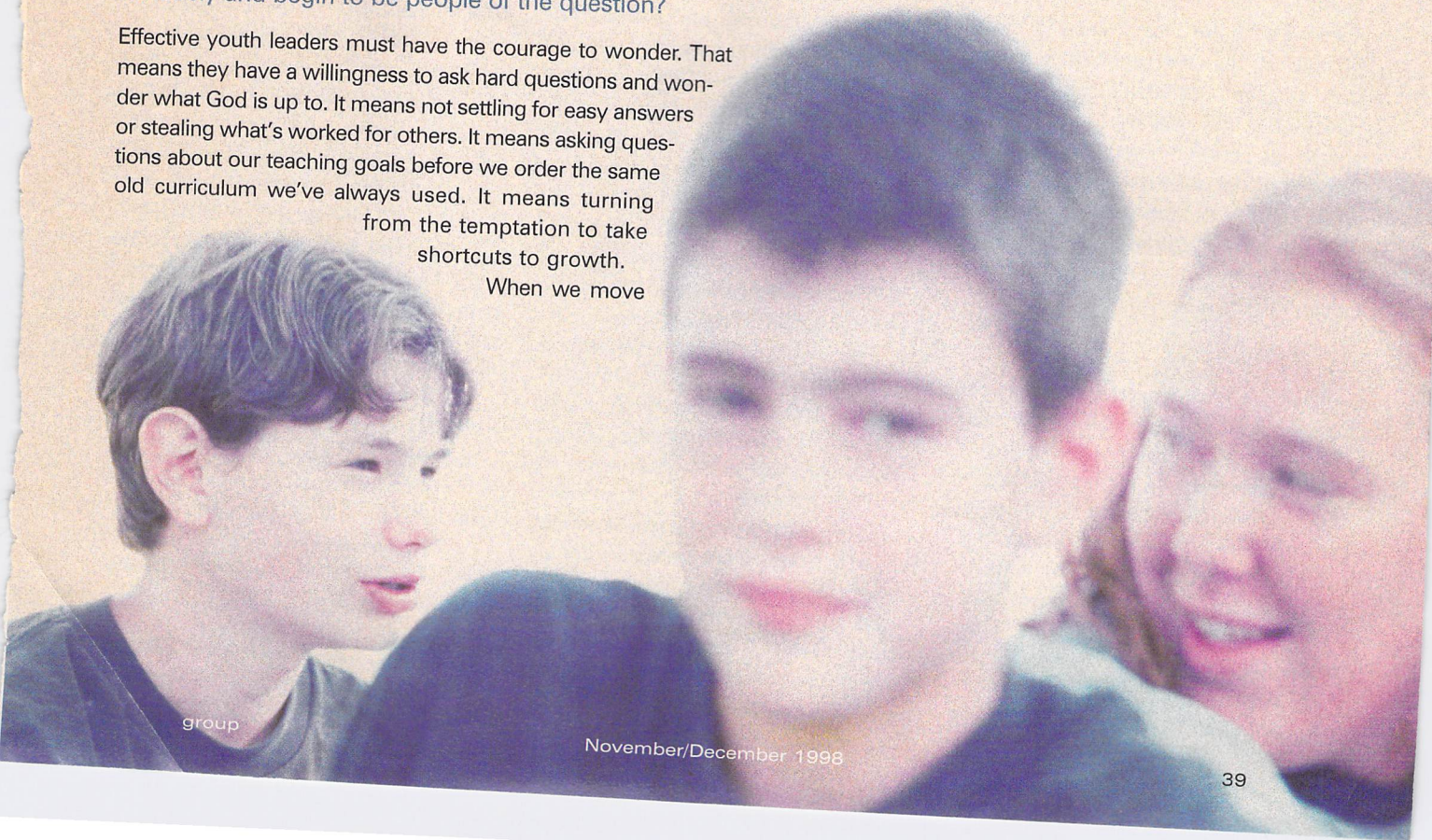
Tiger McLuen

makes his case for
ministry that asks
more questions
than it answers

we live in an answer-oriented society—we gravitate to people and organizations that promise answers to the problems that plague us. And the church is often in follow-the-leader mode. Too many youth workers are looking for someone else's answers rather than wrestling with the right questions. ♦ Jesus was no answer-man. His favorite teaching technique was asking questions—many of which had no "right" answer. In a quick skim through the gospels, you'll find Jesus asked at least 109 distinct questions. Author Dennis Miller says Jesus asked questions 10 times more often than he gave answers. And he often responded to questions by asking another question. Why? Was he just trying to be annoying? ♦ Of course not. Jesus used questions as all good teachers do—to engage learners' minds and hearts. We can use questions to teach, to challenge, to expose, and to encourage. Shouldn't we take Jesus' example seriously and begin to be people of the question?

Effective youth leaders must have the courage to wonder. That means they have a willingness to ask hard questions and wonder what God is up to. It means not settling for easy answers or stealing what's worked for others. It means asking questions about our teaching goals before we order the same old curriculum we've always used. It means turning from the temptation to take shortcuts to growth.

When we move



group

from answer-mode to question-mode, we're forced to take responsibility as leaders. We recognize that our ministry context is unique, and that God wants us to be listening and watching for his activity. Good leaders don't rush toward answers before they've asked tough questions. Questions such as...

- ◆ What are the key needs of my audience?
- ◆ How will I develop strategies to go after those needs?
- ◆ What would I like my teenagers to *know, do, experience* or *become* before they leave my circle of influence?
- ◆ What role will adults play in accomplishing my ministry goals?
- ◆ What draws me to youth ministry?
- ◆ How has my background helped or hindered my ministry? And what can I do about this truth?
- ◆ What are my ministry goals?
- ◆ What is my passion and mission in life?
- ◆ Why do I do the things I do in ministry?

◆ What's one mission-oriented idea I can pursue this year that's new?

These questions won't change your ministry today... probably. They certainly won't help you with Sunday's unplanned lesson. Consider them seeds for new thoughts. What kind of soil will you plant them in?

When you have the courage to wonder, you blunt the tyranny of the urgent. Would you like to see something new blooming in your ministry? You'll find new growth in the questions, not in the easy answers. ■

Tiger McLuen

Tiger McLuen is a 25-year veteran youth leader and executive director of Youth Leadership's Center for Youth and Family Ministry. He also teaches youth ministry at both Bethel and Luther seminaries in Minnesota.

reachingfringeekids

there's a cadre of teenagers who've banded together, resolved to never enter the doors of your youth room. They aren't hostile about God, the church, or even your ministry. They'd show up, except, well, you probably don't know they exist.

Kelly is a typical fringe kid. She spends weekdays in school and weekends killing time at the park downtown. Every Friday night she puts on her Marilyn Manson T-shirt, paints her face white and black, puts in her nose ring, and heads for the park. Kelly and her friends don't terrorize passers-by, they just sit there. They're spectacles and they know it. The stares seem to fill her need for attention and, in a strange way, acceptance.

Kelly is like hundreds of teenagers who refuse to enter our programs because they just don't fit.

by tim baker

If we're going to reach the Kellys in our communities, we've got to know how and why they gravitated to the fringe.

1. Economics—Average teenagers become "fringe kids" when their families are much poorer or richer than their peers' families. Poor kids go to the fringe when they can't afford their peers' toys. Rich kids move to the fringe when they're ostracized for having rich parents.

2. Family Upheaval—Any significant change in "family cabin pressure"

can cause a mainstream teenager to fly to the fringe, where family pain and hiding are the norm. Kids whose parents are going through a crisis fit into this category. Other crises include moving, death, and the loss of a job.

3. Sin—Young people who are entrenched in sin won't enter most youth ministries. Sin keeps us from the presence of God, but it shouldn't keep us from the people who can help us deal with our wrongdoing. Sin makes some kids believe that they deserve the fringe.

4. Social Status—Kids who aren't running with the "in" crowd can easily get pushed to the fringe. Actually, once there, fringe kids notice that there's a society of fringe people waiting for them. It accepts their individuality. And it never questions their motives.

5. Personality Issues—Some young people have significant personality quirks that make them difficult to be around. They're called annoying by other kids. These teenagers get locked in an unending quest for a crowd to hang around with.

6. Different People—Some kids are just plain different. They love shocking people, so they wear pajamas to school. They're typically really balanced people—they make themselves fringe people.

Going after kids who are on the fringe requires finesse. Once you get where they are, the problems they're facing are specific and unique.

◆ **Step into their world.** Where do fringe kids hang out in your community? Find out and go there. Watch them. Study how they dress and act. Learn their values.

◆ **Make a plan and go for it.** For some of us, reaching out to fringe kids is just another thing on our already overcrowded to-do list. We first have to be convinced they need to be reached. Once we are, the issue is how rather than when. Be systematic. Set measurable goals.

◆ **Go after the parents.** If you know the parents, try talking to them *after* you've properly assessed the fringe teenager. Begin by saying something such as, "How would Steve feel if I gave him a call?" Most parents of fringe kids want them to be reached. Be their ally.

◆ **Use the full-court press.** Some fringe kids need regular contact to feel loved and accepted. They need a phone call every other day. So put them on your daily call list. Send them notes.

◆ **Recruit fringe kids to help.** Either send a trusted former fringe kid to talk with the young person, or take him or her with you when you go for a visit. It's a built-in connection.

◆ **Be consistent.** One week of calls is great! But if you get no results, don't give up. ■

Tim Baker is a youth ministry volunteer, a stay-at-home dad, and a writer.